



Woodstock: The Oral History

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

Eyewitness accounts

By: Diana Warshawsky and Richie Havens

Date: 1989

Source: Makower, Joel, ed. *Woodstock: The Oral History*. New York: Doubleday, 1989, 7, 8–9, 10, 12–13, 14, 185–190.

About the Authors: Diana Warshawsky, like many of those who went to the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in August 1969, had little idea of the magnitude of the event that would take place. She had heard that a concert was planned in up-state New York—with a rumored appearance by Bob Dylan—and when she ran into some acquaintances who were planning on going, she joined the group. Overwhelmed by the crowded conditions of the concert, Warshawsky left the event on the second day of the festival. Richie Havens (1941–) born in New York City, was a popular folk guitarist and singer on the city's club scene by the early 1960s. After releasing several albums in the mid-1960s, Havens found mainstream success with *Something Else Again* in 1968. In addition to his work as a recording artist and concert performer, Havens was active in environmental causes as the founder of the Natural Guard, a children's educational foundation. Still a popular concert performer, in 2002 Havens released the album *Wishing Well*.

Introduction

Those who came of age in the 1960s are often described as "The Woodstock Generation" in reference to one of the decade's most notable happenings. The Woodstock Music and Art Fair was organized by two wealthy entrepreneurs, John Roberts and Joel Rosenman, and Michael Lang and Artie Kornfeld, who initially brought a proposal to the investors to build a recording studio in Woodstock, New York. All of the organizers were then in their mid-twenties. The Woodstock project quickly evolved into plans for a three-day series of art exhibitions and concerts; although it was designed as a money-making venture by its organizers, the event also would attempt to capture some of the hipness of the West Coast "be-ins," free concerts that attracted thousands of young people. When the town of Woodstock, New York, refused to grant permission for the festival, the event was moved to Bethel, about 100 miles north of New York City. The organizers anticipated that about 60,000 people would attend the three days of music and exhibitions from August 15 to 17, 1969. Advance tickets sold for \$6.50 for one day or \$18.00 for the entire festival.

With media reports predicting that Bob Dylan would make an appearance at Woodstock, the highways leading from New York City to Bethel quickly jammed with carloads of people on their way to the event. As an estimated 400,000 people camped on Max Yasgur's farm, where the concert was set up, a seventeen-mile traffic jam closed down the roads leading into town. Despite the crowded conditions—made worse by the rain showers that turned most of the ground into a muddy mess—the event mostly lived up to its slogan, "Three Days of Peace and Music." Despite widespread marijuana and LSD use, there were few drug-related casualties or reports of violence among the concertgoers. Although Dylan did not make his expected appearance, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, the Who; Crosby, Stills, and Nash; and Joan Baez all made memorable appearances that were later released on a live album and documentary film. Although the

1960's Lifestyles and Social Trends: Woodstock: The Oral History

promoters initially lost money when most of the audience members crashed the gates instead of buying tickets at Woodstock, they recouped their investment through album sales and film grosses.

Significance

The Woodstock Festival was arguably the defining moment of the 1960s. A celebration of youth culture, the event showcased the optimism of the 1960s through its music, as well as the cooperative spirit and rebellion of the era through the prevalence of drugs and rejection of traditional propriety. Although it started out as a profit-seeking venture, the organizers' inexperience, word-of-mouth anticipation, and proximity to New York City turned Woodstock into a mass spectacle, one that was amply covered by the media. Although some observers were horrified by the overcrowding and unsanitary conditions of the festival, others had a more positive outlook. As performer Richie Havens recalled in a *Life* magazine interview in 1994 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the concert, "We were touted as an angry, violent, radical generation. I knew we needed to have a festival of us, the people. Woodstock belonged to all of the people who came. History was made on a lot of levels, from the New York State Thruway being closed down for the first time, to babies being born in the field, to no violence."

Woodstock took place just days after the Manson Family murders of Sharon Tate and her friends in Los Angeles exposed the dark side of the 1960s hippie culture. Woodstock also marked the end of the 1960s as a cultural period. The Altamont Festival, held later that year in California, resulted in the death of one concertgoer who was stabbed to death by the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang during a performance by the Rolling Stones, as well as the deaths of three other people. A little more than a year after Woodstock, two of its most notable performers, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, were both dead from drug overdoses. Attempts to revive the Woodstock spirit with concerts in 1994 and 1999 met with only partial success and were criticized for being prepackaged versions of an event most memorable for its spontaneity.

Primary Source: Woodstock: The Oral History [excerpt]

SYNOPSIS: Diana Warshawsky was one of the estimated four hundred thousand people who attended Woodstock. She heard of the concert through word of mouth and traveled cross-country with friends in part because of a (false) rumor that Bob Dylan would perform. What she found was an enormous—but mostly peaceful and happy—crowd overwhelming the roads and other infrastructure around the concert. Warshawsky's strongest memory of the music at Woodstock is of Richie Havens's opening performance. Havens's appearance and his performance of the song "Freedom" (which he made up on the spot) made him into a star. Havens himself recounts how he and his band had to be flown in and out of Woodstock by helicopter because the roads were blocked. He also recalls being greatly impressed by the size and spirit of Woodstock, an event which he—like most others—had expected to be just a typical music festival.

Diana Warshawsky

I was living in San Francisco in the Haight-Ashbury area, sort of across the panhandle from the Haight proper, and I heard that there was going to be some kind of gathering of music and it was supposed to be in New York in a place called Woodstock and had something to do with a ranch owned by Bob Dylan. That's what I heard, that's what the rumor had it. And some of the people from the area were thinking of going. I really had no idea what it was going to be; I didn't read newspapers or watch TV at the time. If it was publicized, I didn't have any inkling. It was just something that sounded pretty interesting. And so I made arrangements to go. It just worked out that people from the area were going and I arranged to go with them....

1960's Lifestyles and Social Trends: Woodstock: The Oral History

There was a guy in the area that had a Volkswagen that was just like a cargo van, and it had two seats in the front and just a cargo area in the back. So although it wasn't very hospitable, you know, he took a few people, not too many—maybe four or five people, something like that, all together. But much to my good fortune the van broke down in Elko, Nevada, in the middle of the heat. It was summer and it was hot and the van broke down and there was a Volkswagen dealer in Elko, Nevada. So we went to this Elko dealer and it sounded like the repairs were going to take a couple days to do. I wasn't friendly with or didn't really know any of the people I was riding with, including the guy whose van it was. And it turned out that parked at the same Volkswagen dealer were two young men from New York who were on their way back to New York, also to go to Woodstock. They had been traveling all over the country and their Volkswagen was nice and new and had just been fully repaired, and they were ready to start off and were amenable to having me come with them and help defray expenses—you know, split



Part of the crowd at the Woodstock Festival on August 17, 1969. People are climbing one of the sound towers in the background. An estimated four hundred thousand people attended what proved to be one of the most famous events of the 1960s. AMALIE ROTHSCILD/CORBIS-BETTMANN. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

gas and all of that. So I ended up for the rest of the journey going in a really nice brand-new van with curtains and ice boxes, and it was really nice. It was really a comfortable trip and they were very nice people, good company. They were from Scarsdale, so they were quite affluent and I guess that's how they had this nice new van. All the people I knew had just real scroungy stuff....

... We arrived in Scarsdale at about four in the morning and took a shower, and I was met there and found myself in a convertible with my friend and his friends heading to upstate New York. It was very strange. I remember the weather was that smoggy, real kind of hazy weather they have on the East Coast. I'd never experienced it before. It was humid, the sky looked like it was going to rain, but it was hot. It was very confusing and it seemed real strange. I remember going across probably the Verrazano Bridge and, you know, being tired and sort of weirded out. But the strangest part was when we got close to Woodstock itself. The traffic became very thick and it was bumper-to-bumper traffic all going to Woodstock, and I had no idea this was going to be such a big thing. I thought it was really going to be basically a small gathering and I had just happened to meet up with other people that were going and it was all coincidental. It was sort of scary and frustrating. The roads narrowed to a two-lane road, the road that actually led into where we were supposed to go, and there was bumper-to-bumper traffic in that one lane going in the proper direction, but people pretty quickly became impatient and they began to use the shoulder of the road as a second lane. Then, before long, they were using the shoulder of the opposite part of the road as another lane going there, so on a two-lane road

1960's Lifestyles and Social Trends: Woodstock: The Oral History

there were three lanes of traffic all headed towards Woodstock. And eventually, I seem to recall, they may or may not have taken over the whole other side of the road. In other words, the road was packed with traffic, three to four lanes streaming into this area, and I don't think that many people knew exactly where they were going. They were just following the rest of the cars figuring they'd find it....

... We had to park pretty far away and we had sleeping bags and duffel bags and walked for a long time to get there, you know, following streams of other people all walking with their sleeping bags and duffel bags, and hot, humid. We finally arrived at the area and it was a very strange scene. It was muddy and there was some grass. It was all in browns and grays, you know, from the sky and the overcast and the humidity, and there was a huge—like a big mud puddle is all I can call it—that was as big as a small swimming pool. And all these people had their clothes off and thought they were swimming or something, I don't know. They were all bathing in this muddy water and I remember—I'll never forget this—all these muddy brown bodies, you know, bathing and sort of frolicking in this water hole. It didn't look appealing at all to me. I thought, "Boy, who knows, some people will jump at the chance to do anything." The field was huge and it was surrounded, they had it all surrounded by barbed wire, this area that the concert was taking place in. And we eventually found, with our stuff with us, you know, found a spot in this field. I guess it was sort of like a dry, grassy field. We just walked in, I guess. I don't know what the story was. Were they selling tickets? Were there supposed to be tickets? ...

... It wasn't ever an out of control situation. I know they had emergency stands, you know, in case somebody was flipping out or sick or hurt or anything, and it was a very peaceful group of people. People were just happy, you know, getting stoned and just being happy to be there. But I found it very unnerving to be with this many people inside a barbed wire. And there was a helicopter flying over. I got very paranoid and I didn't like it at all. The whole situation of just being—I felt like I was trapped because I knew I couldn't get out on the road, all the traffic was swarming in one direction. I was sort of encircled by barbed wire, a helicopter flying overhead, and I didn't like the feeling. I was having a good time because of, you know, being with my friends, the person I was with, and I remember, in terms of music, I have almost no recollection of the music except that the only performer that I remember is Richie Havens. I remember him and I remember really liking that and that's it. I don't know who else performed that night. Actually, I'd be curious to know.

I do remember that when the music was over for that evening, we sort of trudged down a road and found a relatively hospitable place to unroll sleeping bags off the side of the road, and slept that night. And there was no question about the fact that I wanted to leave the next morning. And so we ended up hitchhiking out of the area back into New York City. I guess I felt the potential of danger either from within or from without. They had us all caged in the barbed wire, especially with the helicopter flying overhead, and it seemed more like a war zone that happened to be peaceful at the moment. It was real strange and I didn't care for it....

Richie Havens

I was coming back from Europe the second time and getting ready to make my third album. I had heard about Woodstock before that because Michael Lang I had known before I went away, and he had talked about doing something. I had heard that they were going to try to do something like Monterey on the East Coast. That was the image of what it was going to be like.

Now, the consciousness—we have to put it in context, because a lot of people do not have the context out of which it came philosophically. And that is that in California, they had free concerts all the time—they were called "be-ins"—so this was a kind of a be-in for the first time on the East Coast. But Woodstock was going to be a real happening on the East Coast that was more organized and less a happening for the first time. So it came out of context for the philosophy, and it had a philosophy base and not just music.

1960's Lifestyles and Social Trends: Woodstock: The Oral History

I call it a cosmic accident myself. I call it a media event, created by the media and not by the promoters, as much as they would like it to have been more in their control. What happened was created by the media. When I did come back, I heard on the radio all around the country about this festival that was going to happen on the East Coast, and the news was, "Well, they found a place to do it." And the next two days the news was, "Well, they don't have a place to do it." So, mind you, all around the country, every-body's hearing this big music news item. When there was a finality of the location, people started to leave their places then. There were people from Alaska, from California—they drove from everywhere.

I went up Friday morning and I had no problem getting there because actually we left at five in the morning and there wasn't a car on the road going up. I didn't go to the field; we went to a hotel off the highway. It was seven miles away from where the concert was going to be held. There was a Holiday Inn and a Howard Johnson's on the other side of the road. All of the groups were staying in these two hotels.

I remember being in the hotel and the so-called stage management letting everybody know what was going on, which was the road was blocked. And as of this point, nobody is going to the field, and since it was already going on the weekend, it was hard to get certain things to happen. So they called out the helicopter help and they came back and knocked: "Helicopter's going to come." And they came back and knocked again: "Helicopter's not going to come." This went on about three times and finally, I'm sitting in my room, watching TV, and I hear a helicopter landing in the driveway of the Holiday Inn, and it's one of these little bubble guys, you know, with four seats in it. And because we only had two acoustic guitars and two conga players, we went over first. That was how I got over there. And there were very few people over there. Tim Hardin was there and maybe a couple of people who weren't going to play because their bands were nowhere in sight. That was how I had to go on first, because they came and asked me to go on first....

... I actually was afraid to go on first, basically because I knew the concert was late and I knew that people paid for this and maybe it would be a little nuts. Flying over that crowd coming in in that bubble, I knew what being nuts could mean. And I didn't want to be trampled by a billion people. So I said, "Don't put me in front of your problem like this. Don't do this to me, Michael. I'm only one guy. My bass player isn't even here." He was walking on the road for twenty-five miles because the cars were backed up. He made it as I walked off the stage, he came walking up to the stage. They'd left the car on the New York Thruway twenty-five miles back and then walked, along with a lot of other people, and they partied all the way down the line and he got there just as I got off....

... I just saw color to the top of the hill and beyond. When my eyes went from the foot of the stage up to the top of the hill and beyond, I went right up to the sky, I went right out to where the whole thing was. The best sound that I have ever played on outdoors to date happened at Woodstock. As a matter of fact, they said they heard it ten miles away in every direction, because they put those towers up there, and it bounced through those mountains. We not only did it for the crowd there, we did it for the whole countryside at that point. So it was a modular saturation level of vibrations into the planet. This was not just in that spot, it went ten miles all around, and that's a big circle of sound wave....

... I did about four or five encores, till I had nothing else to sing, and then "Freedom" was created right there on the stage. That's how "Freedom" was created, on the stage. It was the last thing that I could think of to sing. I made it up. It was what I thought of, what I felt—the vibration which was freedom—which I thought at that point we had already accomplished. And I thought, "God, this is a miracle. Thank God I got to see it." My whole consciousness of the whole thing was that this was a normal festival, and I had already been too overimpressed by the Newport Folk Festival with twelve thousand people and nothing was ever going to match that. So this wasn't too unusual in its musical aspects, but it was more unusual in the people who came. The people who were up in the mountains who thought they were on vacation in the Catskills who were over fifty to their eighties brought their grandchildren, thinking it was going to be a nice musical festival, and ended up staying for three days and helping everybody out. It was families, it was the policemen in the movie

1960's Lifestyles and Social Trends: Woodstock: The Oral History

saying, "Leave the kids alone," it was a time when consciousness came about. My viewpoint of it was I finally crossed over the line where I don't have to worry anymore. About the whole planet, the entire planet.

I remember walking across that bridge they built back there, and I just made it because my conga drummer's foot went through and I remember turning around and looking at him and his drums bounced—one fell off and somebody caught the other one—and his foot went through that little ramp that they had that went over that back road, and I just couldn't believe it. He was up to his thigh on one leg down in this hole. That was my picture that I saw, and I just couldn't believe it. Then they got him out of there; he was O.K. and he was worried about his drum that fell off the thing more than he was worried about himself. And we got off and then we came down the stairs and that was when my bass player walked up.

While I was onstage, a few helicopter trips came in with stuff, and at that point it could start. They started rolling the stuff up the minute I was doing my first encore actually, and starting to put it in place for the next band that was going to come on. I spent the night backstage and walking around in the side woods and at some of the crafts area, but spent the night mostly backstage. We all were jamming back there, just hanging out really, and eating a lot.

They flew us back and I got the chance to fly over the whole field in an open Army helicopter, which gave me another point of view. Which was kind of interesting because here I was, sitting against the wall with another band and my group like soldiers in an Army helicopter with our equipment, guitars sitting there. And I look down the row and I flash so heavy, "This is what it's like in Vietnam, only it's guns, right?" And I look out the door and all I see is treetops. I actually fantasized tracers coming up out of the treetops. I actually did, all the way back to the hotel because there was nothing but treetops. There was never an open field from that point back to the hotel highway section and you couldn't see the ground and that put me anywhere in the world, and I was in Vietnam in that sense. And all I could think of was, "This has got to be what it's like, man, for all those soldiers, man, flying and ducking stuff coming up out of the damn trees, you know." And that's where I was at going back.

We ended up getting back to the hotel and packing up our stuff and driving out because I was playing in Michigan the next night, that same night that I got back. So we got into the car, the station wagon that brought us, and we went out to the New York Thruway. And there was not one car on the entire Thruway because it was closed all the way back to New York. We had the entire New York Thruway to ourselves completely. In my lifetime, that's one of the biggest highlights I've ever had, is to have the entire New York Thruway closed and us driving from there back to Newark Airport straight away.

Further Resources

BOOKS

Curry, Jack. *Woodstock: The Summer of Our Lives*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989.

Rosenman, Joel, with John Roberts and Robert Pilpel. *Young Men with Unlimited Capital: The Story of Woodstock*. Reprint, Houston: Scrivenery Press, 1999.

Spitz, Bob. *Barefoot in Babylon: The Creation of the Woodstock Music Festival, 1969*. Reprint, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989.

Young, Jean, and Michael Lang. *Woodstock Festival Remembered*. New York: Ballantine, 1979.

PERIODICALS

Fields-Meyer, Thomas, and Patrick Rogers. "Long Time Gone: It's Thirty Years Later: Do You Know Where Your Flower Children Are?" *People* 52, no. 7, August 23, 1999, 58.

Simon, Josh, and Gregory Heisler. "Back to the Garden." *Life* 17, no. 8, August 1994, 32.

WEBSITES

"1969 Woodstock Festival and Concert." Available online at <http://www.woodstock69.com> (accessed April 5, 2003).

"Richie Havens." Available online at <http://www.allmusic.com> (accessed April 5, 2003).

AUDIO AND VISUAL MEDIA

Woodstock: Three Days of Peace and Music. Directed by Michael Wadleigh. 1970, Warner Studios.

Woodstock: Three Days of Peace and Music: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition. Atlantic Records, 1994.

Copyright Notice

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:

<http://www.enotes.com/1960-lifestyles-social-trends-american-decades-ps>